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AUTHOR Baker, Joan M.
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ABSTRACT

The International Reading Association's (IRA) goal of worldwide literacy is commendable, but such a thrust must include the urban poor who are failing to become literate. What educators know about language literacy learning and teaching is often not congruent with what is practiced in poor urban schools. Many homes of the urban poor have few, if any, books, games, spontaneous literacy learning activities, or literacy models. Elementary and secondary urban classrooms are often teacher-centered and wanting of interesting classroom libraries. Textbooks are filled with inappropriate and difficult material. Comprehension is more difficult for urban poor students who cannot activate their existing schema because they do not find their cultures represented in their textbooks. The concern of the teacher, however, is to get the students involved in their assignments as quickly as possible so that the classroom is orderly. Few secondary schools that serve the urban poor have schoolwide programs, which can change the pejorative reading/literacy outcomes of current practice. Instead, quasi-remedial programs serve these students. Reading/literacy researchers encourage the wise use of assessment and assessment tools, but the standardized, validated test is gospel in schools serving the urban poor. Teachers are often forced to use skill-and-drill to prepare students for state-mandated proficiency tests. IRA needs to create an action plan to help educators apply current research findings and best practices to classroom instruction and home reinforcement activities. (Contains 48 references.) (RS)

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Joan M. Baker
Assistant Professor
Cleveland State University
Cleveland, Ohio

IRA's Dissemination of Past and Present Knowledge and Direct Action Could Be A Reading/Literacy Lifeline for Many of the "At Risk" Urban Poor

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[] Even with the contemporary practice of having reading or literacy instruction in secondary schools--middle school and high school--many at risk students especially among the urban poor do not profit from the experience because such instruction or programs are often not based on current research findings and the best practices. Dissemination of the amassed knowledge and positions of IRA and other literacy organizations to key literacy decision makers--state legislators, superintendents, administrators, teachers, and parents--might affect positive changes in programs, instruction, literacy legislation, parent involvement, and most importantly student outcomes. The task of dissemination should be undertaken as part of IRA's worldwide literacy thrust.

IRA's goal of worldwide literacy is a commendable one. Such a thrust must, however, include the segment of the United States population--a plethora of the urban poor--who are failing to become literate or functionally literate through the current instructional programs and practices in their schools.

Over a decade ago, in the Psychology of Reading, Gibson and Levin (1980) discussed the fact that a disproportionate number of the urban poor experienced reading disability. Gibson and Levin's concern has been shared by many other present-day reading theorists, researchers, and educators. A few of the many and varied professionals who have voiced their concern are Jonathan Kozol, an educator; Alex Kotlowitz, a journalist; and Lisbeth Schorr, a sociologist; each has pointed out the need for changes in education and other societal institutions. Like the aforementioned professionals, members of IRA and the contributors to its journals and members of other literacy organizations have not only been

concerned about this devastating condition but have shared theories, research, and practice for the improvement of literacy for over four decades. Unfortunately, this dissemination has usually been within the IRA family--the saved, the converted, the searchers for literacy solutions--not to the stagnant or unaware educators, key decision makers, students, parents, nor concerned people from other societal areas.

Many reading/literacy theorists, researchers, and professionals from other fields understand the stark consequences of the continued failure to illuminate the paths of youth through literacy empowerment. Schorr and Schorr (1988) in Within our Reach, a sociological text, said, "Dreams of a rising standard of living for all Americans, and of a nation that can compete in international markets, will go unrealized if a significant proportion of young people continue to come into adulthood unschooled and unskilled." (p. 11).

Many reading/literacy theorists and researchers have worked diligently to find solutions that can change the "unskilled and unschooled" conditions that Schorr described. A review of the theories of past and contemporary theorists, researchers, and optimal programs would show that we--IRA members and its contributors--have it within our reach to significantly change or even stop the pejorative current literacy conditions. A superabundance of fertile ideas has been presented. Theorists, researchers, and practitioners have communicated great insights into learning, concept formation, language and literacy acquisition, holistic approaches to language learning, innovative and alternate strategies for language learning and teaching, and much more. This rich knowledge base can be the catalyst for substantive change.

Currently, however, what we know and what is practiced in the schools, especially those entrusted with the education of the urban poor, are often not congruent.

It is the purpose of this article to depict aspects of this incongruence and to propose the dissemination of our knowledge which hopefully will create awareness in decision makers, change less than optimal practices and programs, and result in favorable outcomes for secondary learners. In this article, I will review a sample of areas--emergent literacy, schema theory, the total or schoolwide reading program, and assessment. The items will be discussed under the categories of What we know and What is often the practice in schools serving the urban poor.

What we know about emergent literacy

In a journal where the focus is adolescent and adult literacy, it might seem strange to begin with the examination of emergent literacy, but this is the genesis--the prerequisite for all literacy. Emergent literacy, according to Searfoss and Readence (1994), is the period between birth and the time the child or student reads and writes conventionally. It includes print awareness, concepts of print, story sense, oral language, and emerging writing and provides the bases for later growth in reading and writing in the elementary school, the secondary school, and the remainder of life.

While the term emergent literacy is a fairly recent one, as early as 1908, Edmund Huey talked about this concept. According to Huey (1908, 1962) [children] seeing words as friends begins in an informal way in the home. Such things as labelling all items in the child's room,

storytelling, picture reading, play reading and writing, using invented spelling, encouraging the playing of language games, singing, listening to and reciting riddles and rhymes are pleasurable and the precursors to reading. Vygotsky (1962) described such early experiences as those that provide for the development of spontaneous concepts. Such spontaneous language concepts are acquired by the child in a language-rich environment in a heuristic way. While these initial concepts may be altered and refined through growth and experience, they become the basis for later learning. Early spontaneous concepts give birth to metalinguistic awareness and explicit language learning and development.

The aforementioned spontaneous concepts also become the basis for what Vygotsky has termed scientific concepts, the formal instruction of school. In addition to the crucial value of spontaneous concepts for explicit language development, the experiences by which such concepts are acquired create interest and joy in reading; the experiences make reading and other language arts the child's friends. Like Huey and Vygotsky, Gibson and Levin (1980) stated, "Children in a culture replete with graphic displays both pictorial and written, learn with no instruction to differentiate writing from pictures. They learn a great deal about features of writing from pictures. They learn a great deal about features of writing such as linearity and variety of units that can be recombined in many ways, and by five years or so many children can identify a letter as a letter even though they do not know its name." (p. 62)

The same joy, awareness, and concept development that occur in the

young child occur in those who develop literacy in adolescence or adulthood. This occurrence is discussed in Anderson's (1990) book Read with Me where he presents biographical sketches of adult illiterates who later became literate or were in the process of becoming literate. One such thirty-five year old adult male stated, "When I was a child, reading was painful, the one thing to avoid, the thing that I wanted to get away from. Words were my fear. ...to learn to read, we have to reprogram ourselves to see words as our friends, not enemies." (p. 108)

The informal introduction of words as friends begins in the home as Huey, Gibson, Levin and others described. Unfortunately, many homes of the urban poor may have few if any books, games, spontaneous literacy learning activities, or literacy models. Such environments cannot imbue children with the joys of literacy learning. The paucity of spontaneous literacy learning experiences is not by parental design. Rather the culprits or factors are those caused by parents failing to achieve literacy themselves, by their lacking awareness of this responsibility, by having limited funds, and by being overwhelmed by day-to-day survival. Lack of parental concern is seldom the issue.

What is often the practice in schools serving the urban poor

Even though spontaneous concepts are prerequisites for the scientific concepts of school, many students who live in homes which cannot or which do not provide students with print-rich environments, from which spontaneous concepts develop, come to school without these concepts. Because these students do not have the prerequisite knowledge with which to relate the new, scientific literacy knowledge and because schools serving the urban poor are not organized to provide spontaneous-concept-development experiences, such learners are often forced to learn in a rote way rather than a meaningful way. These learners cannot make

sense of what is learned (Ausubel, 1969). As many of these students move through the grades, they can often quote a phonics or other language concept or rule without having the foggiest idea as to what it means or how to apply it. Fields and Spangler (1995) state, "Children who haven't been read to arrive at school unable to process the dialect of book-talk. They understand only context-laden language, which utilizes both the situation and nonverbal communication to add meaning to the words. When confronted with the decontextualized language found in books, these youngsters don't know how to make sense of it." (pp. 15-16).

Unless effective intervention occurs, this "not making sense" of text continues and often rote learning becomes the mode of operation. In addition to the use of rote learning, these students in the secondary school may appear to succeed by using the "shopping mall" strategies where they choose the easy electives and receive certificates of attendance rather than diplomas as mentioned by Powell, Farrar, and Cohen (1985). Still others may form treaties with their teacher where a passing grade is given for good class conduct (Newkirk, 1991). Others may use the strategy as Elaine Williams mentioned in Anderson's (1990) Read with Me of becoming the class clown or class bully. But, Elaine Williams, a secondary student who had failed to learn to read, said, "Instead of turning into the class clown or class bully, though, I withdrew." (p. 115). Like Elaine Williams, there are many withdrawals or dropouts from those who fail to learn to read.

Students like Elaine Williams find little joy in the task of reading. This joy of reading is often engendered in the same print-rich,

nurturing environment where initial or early spontaneous language is acquired. The school environment can complement the print-rich home environment described by Huey. Unfortunately, many of the urban poor neither find this print-rich environment in the home nor in the school. They like Elaine Williams may find little joy in reading.

Additionally, while many of the elementary school classrooms are colorful, most secondary schools serving the urban poor are not. Neither, however, is truly print rich. While the basal textbook is generally there (although not always), large, interesting classroom libraries are seldom the norm. Also missing are enriching experiences such as field trips which help to build language and general concepts. The lack of funding is often responsible for these deficits. Other enriching experiences such as read-aloud experiences, which Trelease (1989) states are appropriate at any age and not dependent upon funding, are missing from the repertoire of many teachers in secondary schools serving the urban poor.

Not only are the classrooms often teacher-centered rather than student-centered and wanting of interesting classroom libraries and other experiences which could motivate urban students, but the secondary text in the various content areas may embody the similar qualities of early elementary-school text that were described by Gibson and Levin (1980). Gibson and Levin hypothesized that, "...the rather Pollyannaish bland stories portrayed in American readers are detrimental to sustaining interest in beginning readers" (p. 534). This is often true of many of the content area texts in the urban secondary schools. In addition, such books may be on the frustration level for many students who have reading disabilities.

Furthermore, the classroom model is often teacher centered, skills oriented, and more often than not begins where the curriculum suggests rather than where students may be. Such practice is one where a first-grade teacher begins reading instruction by teaching phonics (which is highly abstract) without first determining the child's phonological awareness, print awareness, concepts of print, story sense, oral language, and other important, initial language concepts and where the secondary content-area teacher may assign chapters and textbooks to be completed independently without determining the students' prior knowledge, task knowledge, and the appropriateness of the level of the book. Such experiences are not uncommon throughout the school experiences of many "at risk," urban poor students.

Because of the aforementioned, many children who enter school eager to learn literacy skills and other concepts and continue this hope during their experiences in the secondary school may end up like Elaine Williams, who dropped out of high school because of her illiteracy (Anderson, 1990). Williams' response to her failure to become literate was, "My life became a living hell." or like the thirty-five-year-old illiterate who said, "Words were my fear...."

What we know about schema theory

Just as emergent literacy provides the reader with many of the awarenesses and spontaneous concepts or schemata for initial literacy learning, schema is needed for meaningful learning whenever a person reads. Schema theory relates to a person's acquired concepts based on his/her knowledge, experience, language, and culture. Roe, Stoodt, and

Burns (1991) state that, "Readers combine their background knowledge with information in the text to comprehend printed material" (p. 25). Adams and Collins (1985) in Theoretical Models and Processes of Reading state that, "...schema-theoretic approaches to language comprehension is that spoken or written text does not in itself carry meaning. Rather, a text only provides direction for the listener or reader as to how he should retrieve or construct the intended meaning from his own, previously acquired knowledge" (p. 406). Herber and Herber (1993) have stated in relation to schema theory that, "What has been found also supports the need for acknowledging and utilizing the diversity we find among students, not only in background knowledge and experience but also in ability, achievement, and culture" (p. 39). It is imperative for the teacher to realize that a person's concepts based on his/her knowledge, experiences, and attitude greatly affect the information which the reader can construct from the reading. What may be crystal clear to the teacher may be incomprehensible for the readers without the needed schema to understand the text.

Because of the interaction of schema with text; culture, language development, and diversity greatly influence comprehension. This is a critical issue when it comes to students attending schools in poor urban areas where usually they do not find their cultures represented in their books even with the move to multicultural texts and in some urban areas the exploration of African-centered texts and curricula. Jackson (1994) points out that, "Historically, 'minority' people have had to be bicultural, bidialectical, and bicognitive..." (p. 300). Jackson states that she believes that people in different cultures do think differently.

As aforementioned, culture is a very important consideration in reading and learning. [Jackson further says, "...few demands were made on mainstream members, including teachers, to learn about diverse cultures" (p. 300).]

What is often done in schools serving the urban poor

Often in the schools serving the urban poor, the concern of the teacher is to get the students involved in their assignments as quickly as possible so that the classroom is orderly. In doing this, the classroom and homework assignments may closely reflect this statement, "Read pages 112 - 118; answer the questions on page 118." Such an approach suggests that the students have the attitude and motivation, prerequisite skills, needed schema, and metacognition to complete the task independently and meaningfully on their own.

Usually there are no choices of textbooks or supportive materials. Oftentimes as Kozol (1991) points out in Savage Inequalities, there are not even enough textbooks to go around to every student. (Educational funding for many of the school districts contiguous to those serving the urban poor is 170% to 220% higher than urban poor school districts.) Therefore, in schools serving the urban poor, not only may students not be provided with multiple, plausible viewpoints on a topic, but often they are not even provided with a substantive, unilateral viewpoint because there may be too few of the sole, course textbook.

Because of years of being subjected to classes with too few books, no supplementary materials, and no enriching experiences, higher order thinking may be obliterated; the bottom-up model may become pervasive; meaningless, rote learning, and literal-level learning may often be the modus operandi.

The propositions of Herber and Herber (1993) that, "Ideas are the 'stuff' of curriculum" and that "To teach curriculum on a conceptual level rather than on an informational level, teachers have to engage students' minds in the study of ideas." can be an unreachable dream for many of the urban poor students.

What we know about the total or schoolwide reading program

The total or schoolwide reading program is a comprehensive program involving all teachers and administrators through inservice and all students by providing them with the reading services that each needs whether the services be remedial for those who have severe reading disabilities, corrective/improvement for those with some reading problems, or developmental reading for all students in each content area.

Certainly those theorists and researchers who envisioned such a program to meet the reading/literacy needs of students in past decades had foresights that would have changed the reading/literacy outcomes for yesterday's and today's students. Concerned about yesterday's students as had been the reading-researcher pioneers in the 1930's and 1940's, Robert Karlin, like many others, in 1963 wrote an article about the remedial phase of the schoolwide reading program entitled "Programs for Disabled Readers" which appeared in the journal of Developmental Reading, 1:4, Summer 1963. Early theorists and researchers who understood the exigency for reading/literacy programmatic changes to meet the needs of the diverse population then matriculating in America's secondary schools would no doubt have predicted the following negative reading outcomes without such changes:

- As early as 1956, Pentry (1956) stated that, "...early leaving of high school cannot be attributed to a single cause..." however, "low reading achievement is a factor operating in a high percentage of the dropouts."

- Strother (1986) mentioned that Mary H. Futrell, then the president of the National Education Association, pointed out that 60 percent of all United States prison inmates are high school dropouts. This, of course, does not mean that all dropout-prison inmates have low proficiency in reading. However, it is safe to speculate that a great many of these inmates do. Strother commented on a paper presented by Matthew Schulz at the April 1986 meeting of the American Educational Research Association where Schulz pointed out that in studying a sample of dropouts from the Chicago public schools, he found that 78 percent of the black students in the sample had low reading achievement.

- Copperman (1980) included a letter of April 10, 1975, from Ann Thomas, Social Studies editor of Ginn and Company, who stated that there was a downward spiral of the reading level of social studies books to match the instructional reading skills of the students.

- Although it is impossible to report literacy figures with precision because much of the data depends on self report and different levels of literacy, Anderson (1990) acknowledges this in his description of those who could be listed as functionally illiterate--67 million--to the 3 to 4 million who can not read, write or count. Anderson feels that between these two numbers are 27,311,473 illiterates which he believes is a conservative number.

- Kaeser (1984) reported that the dropout rate in Ohio was problematic for the 1982-83 school year. He further pointed out that in Cleveland "Based on data from the previous five years, approximately 40 percent of the class of 1983 dropped out between seventh and twelfth grades." One has to wonder how many of the 40 percent of the dropouts were poor readers.

- In his book Illiterate America, Kozol (1985) stated that 25 million American adults are unable to read warning labels, letters, and a daily newspaper. He further said that another 35 million read less well than the "full survival needs of our society."

- Project Learn for adult illiterates in Cleveland, Ohio, and many other adult literacy programs which emanate from such organizations such as the National Advisory Board of Literacy Volunteers of America suggest that there is a great need among many American adults for literacy intervention.

While there are limitations in the above descriptions and statistics mainly because many of the statistics are based on self report and reports and statistics from social agencies, justice and penal systems, and organizations which serve illiterates and because of the varied definitions of illiteracy and functional illiteracy. Even in

consideration of these limitations, the above information definitely points out a current reading/literacy problem and reflects the anticipated problem that reading-researcher pioneers had tried to stave off by the design of the total or schoolwide reading program.

The concerns of the reading-researcher pioneers were certainly made in light of the changing nature of American schools where the elite--especially in the high schools--were educated in the beginning of the century to schools with dynamic increases in population and diversity with the advent of each decade. [According to the Digest of Educational Statistics by the U.S. Department of Education, "Historical Summaries of Public Elementary and Secondary School Statistics," (1994), only 20.4 percent of the elementary-age children were in attendance in public elementary schools and 3.3 percent of secondary-age students were in attendance in public high schools in 1900.]

Based on the statistics which show the small number of students in attendance in America's schools at the beginning of the twentieth century, it could be expected that there was a superabundance of illiterate Americans at that time. Today, however, many Americans are appalled at the statistics which categorize many students and adults as illiterate or functional illiterate. The reading-researcher pioneers knew that it was necessary to address holistically the reading needs of all students in the America's secondary schools which were serving racial, cultural, and educational diverse populations; thus, the design of the total or schoolwide reading program.

The reading-researcher pioneers were visionary. Their design of the total or schoolwide reading program was correct in the past and is still correct today to change the pejorative reading/literacy outcomes.

What is often the practice in schools serving the urban poor

Few secondary schools which serve the urban poor have instituted a total or schoolwide reading program. This is true despite the fact that reading disability is found disproportionately among the urban poor, that a significant number of urban poor secondary students drop out of school, and that many students, teachers, and administrators have been displeased with and numerous community people have been appalled at the reading outcomes of this population. Many in this population like Bamman, Hogan, and Greene (1967) feel that "One of the critical areas in education has been, and today is, reading" (p. iii) and that, "The paramount need is for critical thinking, reading, and writing skills..." (Alvermann and Phelps, 1994, p. 20).

There may be many reasons why the total or schoolwide reading program has not been instituted, but among these are lack of awareness and funding. In the schools serving the urban poor, the general funding is less than in the more affluent socioeconomic areas while the academic needs especially for enriched literacy/reading experiences are greater. Awareness is key, but funding is crucial especially for the institution of the intervention phases--remediation and correction/improvement.

Those who have the awareness of the value of the total or schoolwide reading program know that what was recognized as extremely important five decades ago is even more important in the 1990's when all school populations are more diverse. The academic diversity or heterogeneity is evident in an accurate evaluation of the secondary urban poor students' literacy/reading skill levels--some may be nonreaders, some may be from three to seven grade levels behind their designated grade level, others

may be a few months to two years behind their designated grade level, some may be at grade level or above. All, however, need literacy/reading instruction based on current theories and research and best classroom practices. Teachers and administrators need inservice so that they too are aware of and can institute current research findings, theories, and best practices.

While the schools which serve the urban poor do generally have a quasi-form of the remedial phase of the total or schoolwide reading program, they do not serve all the students in the school. The term quasi-form is used here because the remedial phase in most schools serving the urban poor does not follow current theories and research nor the best practices.

Even the way students in the urban secondary schools usually qualify for the remedial program does not adhere to the position of the I.R.A. (This will be discussed in the next section of this paper on assessment.) Students in such schools who score below the 33 percentile on a national group, standardized, validated test are selected for remedial instruction.

More often than not programmed-type materials are used. These workbook-type materials consist of brief reading passages followed by true-false or multiple-choice, literal-level comprehension questions and phonics exercises. Bond and Tinker (1967) stated, "...in general, programmed instruction is best adapted to teaching facts that need to be memorized and those processes that need to become automatic" (p. 38).

For the most part, then, the instruction is not individualized which means that it would have been teacher-developed or at least teacher-

tailored to meet the needs of the students in the program. Rather, materials are often used in a teacher-proof, text-driven fashion. Little if any effort is placed on securing materials based on the students' interest, prior knowledge, cultural diversity, styles of learning, or strongest learning modalities. There are few opportunities to use eclectic approaches to help students learn or for the infusion of student-selected materials or language-experience-type approaches. Usually, a bottom up, basal skills approach is used.

The above-described materials and approaches briefly depict many quasi-remedial reading programs serving the urban poor. The materials and approaches are expedient and economical. Often the teacher charged with this responsibility has a quasi-remedial, regular-class size of students with severe reading problems. In such cases, the crucial, daily goal is that students be on task, cover the pupil performance objectives, and be prepared for the state proficiency test and other standardized tests. The daily activities, then, often mirror the goal--the formal test. While the common objective format of most class activities prepares some students for the formal test, it does little if anything to prepare the students for the critical-thinking-reading-writing demands of a global society.

Just as the materials and approaches mentioned above are far from optimal for remedial reading students who need to find joy and interest in reading, to have high-interest usually low-vocabulary materials, to use personalized, language-experience actiivities, to have materials tailored to their specific needs, to be exposed to reading-writing

activities which foster metacognitive skills; such quasi-remedial programs certainly are far from the goal of the reading-research pioneers who envisioned a holistic, individualized remedial reading program. This holistic, individual design for the remedial/intervention phase of the secondary total or schoolwide reading program was very similar to the very successful Reading Recovery, a remedial/intervention program for first graders.

The importance of remedial reading being individualized is so that not only does each student have the opportunity to master the needed reading/literacy skills and to find the type of joy in reading that will lead to lifelong reading, but also to receive the counseling that will booster the low self esteem which often accompanies disabled reading. Anderson (1990) in describing adult illiterates or disabled readers said, "There's more to learning to read than learning to read. A lot of healing has to be done. ...One is that students feel that they know less than they really do because of all the extra luggage they carry, the guilt: This is my fault..." (p. 116).

Similarly, Ekwall and Shanker (1988) stated, "Most disabled readers can be expected to possess some degree of emotional maladjustment, even though it is not alway apparent" (p. 280). Along the same line, in a study Lawrence (1971) stressed the importance of having counseling as a integral part of remediation. In the study a group of disabled readers was divided into four subgroups--one group received remediation only, a second received remediation and counseling, a third received counseling only, and a fourth group received no treatment. After a period of six months, the group that received remediation and counseling did the best

followed by the group that received counseling only.

Not only do the schools serving the urban poor need the holistic, individualized remedial phase of the total or schoolwide reading program, but they need the other phases--corrective/improvement, developmental, and inservice. With the institution of the total or schoolwide reading program, all students, all school personnel, and parents would be served. Such reading supports would lead to the development of strategic reading awareness and reading-research-driven decisions which in turn would alleviate illiteracy, functional illiteracy, and aliteracy from the secondary schools serving the urban poor.

What we know about assessment

Assessment like reading has changed as a result of new research and theories. Because of research, assessment is no longer static and unidimensional. Rather, it is now ubiquitous, dynamic, and multifarious in education and everywhere. It includes very, very informal assessment to formal assessment tools. It moves from internal--personal--evaluation or self evaluation such as metacognition to external assessment where the test designer and the test-taker do not know each other as is the case in the use of most standardized, validated tests. Assessment occurs moment by moment as is the case in classroom observation of students. It may occur formatively during the course of a program or summatively at the end of a program. It may be objective or subjective. Assessment can entail process and be developmental such as the writing process or portfolio assessment with the product resulting from numerous, guided, recursive steps. There are many other assessments; all add pieces to the cognitive and psychological, holistic understanding of learners.

In getting a holistic view of the learner, vigilant reading/literacy researchers are always mindful of the power and value of assessment while acknowledging its limitations and errors. These researchers understand that assessment used wisely provides the teacher and learner with great insights into the learner and learning process and helps with sound decision making. On the other hand, they know that assessment used injudiciously leads to misuse or abuse of assessment tools and fosters poor and/or incorrect decision making. Even worse, poor decision making often leads to academic death for many learners especially among the urban poor.

These vigilant reading/literacy researchers encourage the wise use of assessment and assessment tools. Often these reading/literacy researchers stress the importance of consulting the Mental Measurement Yearbook and Test Critiques before purchasing and using formal assessment tools. They instruct that each assessment no matter what its nature or design and no matter how carefully it is planned and orchestrated contains only a sample of possible item choices and measures only a sample of behavior.

Further, these researchers know that all assessment--formal and informal--contains errors, the standard error of measurement based on the unreliability of the assessment tool. These researchers understand that even a superb test is not 100 per cent valid or reliable or is without some bias. Additionally, they know that extant assessment tools usually do not reflect current research and our current knowledge base. The above statements are a paucity of current assessment concepts and are predicated on the following sample of concerns:

- Farr (1969) cautioned that, "Performance on any one reading test is only a sample of an individual's behavior in one given situation under a single set of conditions" (p. 7).

- Schreiner (1979) outlined assessment as part of the instruction and decision making process where assessment outcomes help to determine whether instruction is continued, recursive, or changed to meet the needs of the learner.

- International Reading Association (1979) espoused that, "No single measure or method of assessment of minimum competencies should ever be the sole criterion for graduation or promotion of a student. Multiple indices assessed through a variety of means, including teacher observation, student work samples, past academic performance, and student self reports, should be employed to assess competence.

- Adkins (1974), Chase (1974), and Anastasi (1976) stressed the importance of considering the following in the use of standardized, validated tests: standard error of measurement based on the unreliability of tests, bias, true score, objectivity, and other pertinent topics.

- Perrone (1977) outlined the abuses of standardized tests and questioned: "Do tests [standardized] provide more information about a child's achievement in most subject areas than the child's teachers typically possess?"

- Oscar Buros' (1938) displeasure with the misuse of tests motivated him to develop the Mental Measurement Yearbook.

- Valencia and Pearson (1987) contrasted current knowledge of the reading process and many extant standardized tests; they found great discongruity.

- Hoffman (1995) stated that, "Standardized measures often do not reveal the real knowledge possessed by an adult or a child" (p. 594).

- Brozo and Simpson (1995) said, "We ascribe almost magical qualities to standardized reading tests"

- Aronson and Farr (1988) cautioned that with the broad use of reading tests there is a great possibility that such tests will determine the objectives or drive the curriculum.

The current knowledge and understanding of the values of and caveats about assessment could do much to put assessment in the correct perspective for all involved in the educational process.

What is often the practice with assessment in schools serving the urban poor

"About 560 seniors in the city's [Cleveland, Ohio] public schools will not graduate this June because they failed the state-mandated proficiency test" (Jones, 1995). This quotation was in the May 27, 1995, issue of the Plain Dealer. It is antithetical to the position of IRA. The article further states that the 560 is 23 percent of the Cleveland City School's class of 1995.

Such credence is placed in proficiency tests and other formal tests that these tests often drive the curriculum. As a result, an inordinate amount of instruction time is spent in skill-and-drill type preparation. Not only are the teachers overly concerned with covering the material, but many administrators rigidly require such coverage. They have what Newmann (1988) call "addiction to coverage." This obsession often leads to rote rather than meaningful learning as stated in Ausubel (1969). While rote learning, which skill-and-drill activities usually produce, has its place for items such as learning the times tables; such an approach is seldom helpful where reflective, explicit, critical, meaningful learning is desired. It would seem that strategies for developing or reactivating schema and metacognition as mentioned in the above section on schema are optimal for meaningful learning.

Not only is the proficiency test revered in many school settings, but often in areas serving the urban poor, the standardized, validated test is gospel. There is no consideration of true score, standard error of measurement, or test bias. Because of this many students are placed in pseudo-type remedial programs solely because they scored below the 33 percentile on a designated standardized reading test.

The above scenarios should not be interpreted to mean that there are no teachers serving the urban poor who use various assessment tools and use them judiciously. Certainly there are teachers who understand the value and limitations of formal assessment tools and who use an array of student assessments such as teacher-made, observation, peer, self, and different types of writing as assessment. For truly, some of the most dedicated, creative teachers instruct the urban poor. They give freely of their time, funds, and dreams and are inexplicably tied to the success of their students. Many of these stellar teachers personally provide enriching materials and experiences and are often responsible for the successes among the urban poor.

But, even the stellar teachers of the urban poor are often forced to assume the skill-and-drill mantle in an attempt to prepare students for state-mandated proficiency tests and district-prescribed standardized, validated tests where the students' requisite knowledge is very weak or missing. Skill-and-drill usually becomes the modus operandi.

In the area of reading/literacy assessment, like the other topics included in this article, the urban poor are often shortchanged and victimized because those entrusted with their education fail to use assessment with regard to its values and limitations.

Conclusion

While none of the 560 Cleveland seniors who failed the above-mentioned proficiency test experienced optimal treatment based on the outcomes of the single assessment, the decision gives a hypothetical glimpse into other negative reading/literacy practices which have probably affected this sample of students during their school careers.

Further, it can be surmised that many of these 560 students have not had the advantages of instruction or measurement based on research and best practices. Therefore, deficits may have occurred in any or all of the areas presented in this article--emergent literacy, schema theory, the total or schoolwide reading program, assessment, and/or others. Surely some of these students came to school without the prerequisite emergent literacy experiences--experiences which Vygotsky called spontaneous concepts which are the concepts upon which the scientific concepts of school are built. Many of the students' prior-to-school experiences and during-school experiences may have failed to expose them to the joys of language learning or to programs designed around their areas of interest. All of these students needed to be exposed to the total or schoolwide reading program where each teacher clarifies content-area, specific concepts; provides reading, writing, and critical thinking strategies; and makes available enriching books and vibrant concept development and cultural experiences. Some of these students undoubtedly needed moderate reading/literate, small-group intervention. A great many of these students probably needed the individualized reading/literacy skill development and counseling of the remedial program. All deserved better reading/literacy support than they have received.

Many of these students and numerous others [According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) recently stated that the reading scores for high school seniors have plunged. (Plain Dealer, April 25, 1995)] are students whom Lisbeth Schorr (1988) on Within Our Reach describes as coming into adulthood unschooled and unskilled and who are experiencing rotten outcomes.

In Schorr says that we know what to do; now, we must develop the will to do it. This is true of IRA and other reading organizations. We

know many things to and many things not to do in reading/literacy acquisition and concept development. The brief discussion in this article seems to validate this. Now, we have to develop the will to create an action plan. Such a plan will be a lifeline to many of the urban poor struggling with literacy issues. For students like Elaine Williams, an adult illiterate who was mentioned earlier, who said as a result of her failure to become literate "My life became a living hell," not only will such a plan be a lifeline but life itself.

Our action plan can both create an awareness of current research findings and best practices to classroom instruction and home reinforcement activities. While we do have it within our reach to create awareness of research and ways to apply it and best practices in the teaching/learning of the urban poor and others, there is little we can do in the critical area of funding except to create an awareness of the deleterious reading/literacy outcomes without adequate funding. Alexander (1993) said, "Children in poorer areas are deprived of equal educational opportunities under state's public school funding system...." Genuine focus on this problem can make a reading literacy difference. The following are just a few of the suggestions that IRA may include in its action plan:

- Design and distribute readable, untechnical pamphlets for teachers, administrators, legislators, and students.
- Write letters to legislators about optimal reading/literacy programs, and assessment based on research and best practices.
- Volunteer your talents to schools serving the urban poor as a resource person, inservice person, or tutor.
- Develop reading/literacy public service announcements about optimal teaching/learning strategies, programs, and assessment for radio, television, and public posting.
- Write reading/literacy articles for the layperson that can appear in popular magazines.

- Offer IRA conference stipends or scholarships to those who teach the urban poor to attend and/or to present reading/literacy conditions or effective strategies

- Encourage parents, teachers, administrators, and legislators to avail themselves of the reading/literacy publications of ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading and Communication Skills at Indiana University.

- Distribute high-interest periodicals and books to the urban poor.

- Outline for state legislators the value of allotting funds for at least one personal trade book and one magazine subscription for all students who have weak reading/literacy skills.

- Have long-term or longitudinal tutoring for students and parents where needed.

- Train college of education students and others to work with the urban poor as part of the literacy support on a continuous basis not just for field experiences and student teaching.

- Have urban literacy as a priority which supersedes or is equal to our thrust for world literacy.

Members of IRA and other reading/literacy organizations must not forget the quotation of Edmund Burke, "The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing. In this case, the evil is the use of less than optimal or harmful reading/literacy practices among the urban poor. We are the good men. We can do much to stave off the trend of young people coming into adulthood unschooled and unskilled.

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